

MASTERS LE MESURIER INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC SECTOR CONVENTION 2009 SYDNEY AUSTRALIA



G4 Writing for Governance

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"Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily."

Professor Robert Eagleson¹



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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of writing in the government sector - the process and challenges. The information is equally valid for a Public Servant and a Private Sector consultant working on an assignment for a government. Many of the points in this paper could be a topic and full day training course in their own right. It is my intention to provide a high level overview for you to investigate your own strengths and weakness in writing and using the resources in this document and other resources to improve the product of a significant part of a Public Servant's day - Writing.

Some context

I have been a consultant or an executive for over 25 years in both the public and private sector. I have used this paper as an opportunity to research current views on writing for Government.

To provide some currency and relevance to the material, I interviewed a wide number of senior government officials to obtain their views on this topic. These people included:

- ❖ A former minister of a State Government;
- ❖ A Deputy Chief Executive (IT) of one of Australia's largest government agencies, with one of the largest IT systems in government;
- ❖ The Chief Audit Executive of an Australian Government Agency that has financial contact with almost every person and business in the country;
- ❖ One of the State Auditor-Generals;
- ❖ A Group General Manager Corporate Services for a large government trading enterprise; and
- ❖ A Manager in an enforcement agency with considerable experience in policy writing.

I also interviewed a General Manager from the leading consulting firms that assist corporations and industry

groups with communicating and developing relationships with governments.

Finally, I undertook a small literary review of the writing process, and some of the material reviewed can be found in the "Resources" section at the end of this paper.

Finally it must be said that this paper has been written from an Australian context. Many of the principles are generally applicable and I have used these in my consulting work with overseas government agencies. However, it will be important to consider any local or cultural issues prior to applying all these principles to your particular circumstances.

Why write

It is important to understand why we write to set some framework for rest of this paper. We need to understand the objective of writing to help guide our process.

There are basically two major themes as to why we would choose to writing:

- ❖ To cause an action or response (influencing). That is to convince the reader of something and to engage them in some consequential action, or
- ❖ To communicate and inform.

If we agree on the assumption that our writing is to generate some action, then the writing must be clear on:

- ❖ What needs to be done, and
- ❖ How will the action be measured (how will be know the action has been successfully completed).

Changes in people's reading skills

As much as our writing skills have changed over the years, it is important to consider the changes in our audiences reading skills as this influences our approach to writing.

It has been said, that whilst the purchase of books and magazines has continued to grow (disproving the theory that the internet would replace books), people's general reading skills have changed.

People are used to more concise and shortened information. People's attention span has reduced, limiting their ability to focus for long periods of time on detailed and complex issues.

People are more time poor and under increased stress, which decreases their ability to focus on information for extended periods.

We can see parallels to sport. For the cricket aficionados, serious cricket was test cricket a five day game of strategy, needing skills in batting or bowling for many days on end to win or draw a game. Then in the 1970's was the introduction of the 50 over version the "One Day (ODI)" format. In recent years we have seen the explosion of the 20:20 format, which is a version of cricket taking just 3 hours, a far cry from the 5 day match.

It is important to also recognise that the Public Sector have been getting leaner over the last 20 years. What might have been undertaken by 3 Public Servants is now completed by 1. Work levels and demands have been increasing whilst resource levels decreased. Therefore the time available to actively and diligently digest details and details of information have now passed.

The lean "ODI" form of Government has arrived.

Your audience

Before commencing your document (and even before you research) it is critical that you understand the audience of your work.

There may in fact be different audiences for the same document, and it is important that you structure the report to meet the different needs and expectations of these groups.

Examples of the audiences are:

- ❖ Minister;
- ❖ Audit Committee ;
- ❖ Secretary / Director General;
- ❖ Executive Committee;
- ❖ Senior Executive;
- ❖ Another Government Agency;
- ❖ Another Government;
- ❖ A member of the public; and/or
- ❖ A corporation

Structure of the document

Where there are multiple audiences, it is important to think of the structure of the document with their various levels of detail and knowledge requirements.

If we were to use an Internal Audit report as an example, there would be a wide variety of audiences:

- ❖ Audit Committee;
- ❖ Secretary / Director General;
- ❖ Chief Operating Officer / Chief Financial Officer;
- ❖ Line Senior Executive; and
- ❖ Line Manager.

In the one report, the author will need to structure the information so that each of these different audiences can receive the level of detailed information appropriate to them.

In this example the Audit Committee, Secretary/Director General and the COO/CFO would read a 1 - 2 page Executive Summary.

The Line Senior Executive would read the Executive Summary and the body of the report which would not have all the minute details.

The Line Manager would read the entire report with all the details in the appendix of the report.

The Reader's Style

You need to identify your reader's preferred styles and understand their thinking patterns (left - logical brain, right - creative brain).

This can be achieved by asking others who know them and identify reports that have been well received.

Given you are writing in response to a request from someone, you have the ability to ask them directly about their preferred styles and formats!

Why has the document been requested?

Another way of thinking about your audience is to focus on a couple of key questions:

- ❖ What is the question I have to answer?
- ❖ Why is it being asked?
- ❖ What does the reader need to do with the information they receive?

Thinking about these questions may help you to ask the right questions and analyse the information.

In NSW schools the six stages of information process children are taught starts with the idea of determining the question²:

- ❖ Define (What do I really need to find out?)
- ❖ Locating (Where can I find the information I need?)
- ❖ Selecting (What information do I really need to use?)
- ❖ Organising (How can I best use this information/)
- ❖ Presenting (How can I present this information?)
- ❖ Assessing (What did I learn from this?)

Champion and Guide

Early on in your assignment clearly identify who is the Champion of your document. You should meet regularly with them through your research and writing activity.

They should protect you from others interfering with the content of your document.

In your absence and perhaps at higher levels they need to be capable of speaking to the details of your document and finally provide guidance on the stakeholders, their needs and styles to help you reach them with your intended message.

Reader's need to respond

As indicated earlier, the main purpose of writing a document is to cause an action or response.

To that end, the document needs to be clear and concise.

The summary and recommendations should be up front (BLUF - "bottom line up front"), the details in the middle and then issue and background.

For a document to a Minister, this should be 1 - 2 pages in length and is likely to be in a "Staccato" form. This form is still evolving in the Public Sector, but has been in the corporate sector for many years.

When making recommendations ensure that:

- ❖ There are clear actions in each recommendation (the What);
- ❖ Each recommendation has defined performance measures and target (the When/How);
- ❖ There are clear accountabilities (the Who);
- ❖ Ensure there are not too many recommendations;
- ❖ Not all recommendations are equal, check if all the recommendations need to be in the executive summary / Ministerial document;
- ❖ Ensure they are recommendations and not tasks resulting from a recommendation; and
- ❖ Ensure the recommendations relate to and result from the background and facts.

The Process

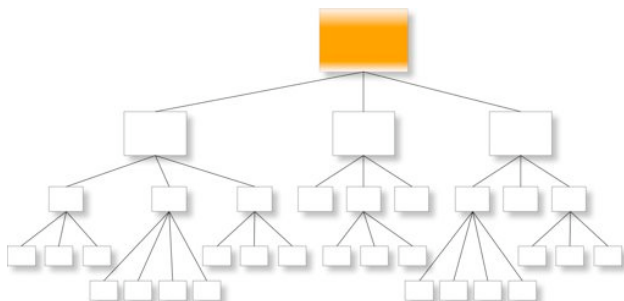
There is a significant art in writing a document to ensure the structure, clarity of style, and quality (editing and proof reading etc). Importantly the information should be built upon well structured arguments otherwise there is no value in the document.

Much of this section is an extremely high summary of the work of Barbara Minto from her book “The Pyramid Principle” Her work is seen as the leading example on presenting your thoughts in a clear manner that allows the reader to follow a sequence of thoughts to arrive feeling confident of the actions you have recommended they take.

Her book is divided into two parts - Logic in Writing and Logic in Thinking. In her introduction to Part 1 she states: *“One of the least pleasant aspects of a professional person’s job is the need to put things in writing. Almost everyone finds it a chore and wishes he were better at it.”*³

So we can take comfort that we are not alone in the challenge of writing!

Minto recommends that as your ideas are gathered you start to summarise the information from the bottom up. As you collate the information into like groups of information and you will find that you build a pyramid, as per the diagram below (Minto, 2002, p. 13).



The key conceptual tests in building your pyramid is to keep in mind the following:

1. A box with items below it must effectively summarise the items below it;
2. Thoughts or ideas within a group must be the same type of idea; and
3. Ideas need to be logically ordered.

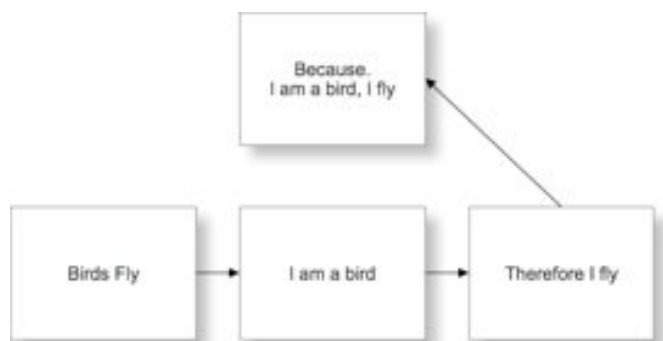
In considering the logic of your structure, there are a number of ways to order your ideas (Minto, 2002, p. 15):

- “Deductively (major premise, minor premise, conclusion).
- Chronologically (first, second, third).
- Comparatively (first most important, second most important etc).”

One of Minto’s key themes is to have clear in your mind “what is the question I am answering”. Until this is clear you have have difficulty in building up the structure of your pyramid of thoughts and ideas.

As you consider your ideas and the process of summarising them there are two forms of reasoning that need to be considered (Minto, 2002, p. 63-64):

1. Deductive - this tends to be our natural pattern, and often used in problem solving. It follows the structure of making a statement about a situation, making another statement about a similar and related situation and finally drawing an implication. The diagram below provides an example:



2. Inductive reasoning is more complex and requires a greater level of creativity. This approach notices the relationship between ideas and groups them in accordance to their significance. There are two major concepts that you must consider with this approach - defining the grouping and identifying ideas that do not fit the group. The following diagram provides an example:



Clarity

An important message can be lost if the delivery is not clear. There have been many examples of documents written by government agencies that have been commented in the media because they were written in such a manner that even the most intelligent person could not understand what was being stated.

Short and Sharp

Writing for government is no longer a narrative. The writing should be crisp and clear. No long sentences. Ideally consider a 15 - 20 word limit in a sentence. If you have “but”, “however” and other joiners, consider using two or more sentences.

Remember BLUF - bottom line up front. Ensure that the key messages are delivered early otherwise they may be lost in the middle of the document.

Jargon and Acronyms

Avoid technical jargon. Rather than “implementing a WAN accelerator” you might write, “purchase and implement technology that will increase the speed of access to information at the user’s desktop by 25%”.

Where-ever possible use a business term rather than technical language. As another example, “the servers were off line for 3 hours” in business terms might be written as “1200 call centre staff were unable to answer approximately 43,200 call over the 3 hours the computer and telephone systems were unavailable”.

Avoid where ever possible acronyms. The can be easily misunderstood. One interviewee gave an example around the common acronym DOD. DOD is commonly thought of as the Department of Defence. Yet in another department DOD stood for Died of Disease.

Whilst this may seem a simplistic example, the two department did communication with each other from time to time, and the use of DOD created misunderstandings with the audience.

Plain English

Much of material I read and the people I interviewed discussed the need for using Plain English. I struggled to find a clear and useful definition. I eventually discovered the following definition by Professor Eagleston:

“Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily.”

My other thoughts in relation to the use of Plain English are:

- ❖ Is your writing such that you need to be an academic to understand it?
- ❖ Is the language is consistent across all elements of the document?
- ❖ Are you using words that you understand and your readers are likely to understand?

Editing and Proofreading

Some people see editing and proofreading as one in the same thing. They are closely related but are subtle different. Information in this section is a summary from the 3 resources identified in the Resource section of this paper from Purdue University, University of North Carolina and the University of Missouri.

Editing is a process that commences as you complete the early drafts of a document. The focus at this stage is on the content, structure, theme, reasoning, clarity, style integrity, citations etc.

Proofreading is at the end of your writing process and is more focused on correct spelling, grammar, punctuation. This phase should only commence once your editing and revision process is complete.

For both phases of editing and proofreading, it is important to get away from the text for a while. It is very hard to edit or proofread a piece of work that has just been completed. As the writer you are too close to the text and will have a tendency to read what you meant to write rather than what is actually written.

Once you are ready to start editing or proofreading the work, try to trick yourself that it is a different piece of work. This can be partially achieved by changing the size of the paper, the text sizing, font, colour etc.

Find a quiet place to do this work. If you are in an open office area, consider booking a meeting or quiet room for a short period of time.

Remember this is hard work and can be draining on your concentration. Consider short blocks of 15 to 20 minutes and have a break. Consider not starting at the beginning but at the most important part and work through the document in different sections to break up the structure of the document in your mind.

When undertaking the editing phase (which will happen with each major draft), consider the following:

- ❖ Content and Structure - are the issues clear, are the recommendations action orientated and prioritised? Is the background and analysis logically sequenced and does the movement from paragraph to paragraph, section to section follow a clear and logical pattern;
- ❖ Reasoning - ensure that your arguments build upon the information provided;
- ❖ Clarity - ensure the sentences and paragraphs make sense. Consider removing excess words and even sentences and paragraphs that do not add to the readers information needs. Ensure all the terms and technical information is clearly defined and explained;
- ❖ Style integrity - have you used consistent styles for numbering, bullet points, indents etc throughout the writing. Make sure that there is consistency in the tone, such as formality, active/passive, gender usage etc;
- ❖ Citations - have you cited all references and have they been cited in a consistent and correct manner;

Once you have finished your editing process it is time to commence the proofreading phase. Key activities to consider in this phase are;

- ❖ Don't rely on the computer spell checker - they may not be set for your language version (ie Microsoft defaults to US English and whilst you can set to UK or Australian English it will regularly default back to US). They usually do not have an extensive dictionary and an incorrect word spelt correctly will not be picked up (such as there and their);
- ❖ Don't rely on the computers grammar tool - they have limited rules and do not always follow grammar rules appropriately. I have found them useful to identify passive voice sentence structures and excessively long sentences;
- ❖ Read the text out loud - this will help identify the use of double words, left out words, poorly structured and vague sentences;

- ❖ Read one sentence at a time - if you have the document in a word processor insert a carriage return at the end of every sentence and then review each sentence one at a time. If you have a hard copy use a solid ruler or paper to block out other sentences so you can focus on just that one sentence;
- ❖ Identify punctuation - circle each punctuation mark and test its validity;
- ❖ Read the paper backwards - using this method you are not worried about the content of the writing but this is a very helpful tool to focus on the spelling;
- ❖ Be aware of your common mistakes (eg practice and practise, to/too/two, advice/advise) - then read the document for each common mistake (ie if you have 5 common types of mistakes, read the paper 5 times and on each occasion focus only on one of your common mistakes.

If you have used a colleague to undertake a proofread of your writing remember they are only making suggestions and as the author you have the final say on the changes to be made.

General advice

Identify and Use the Public Record

There is a considerable amount of information available on the public or semi-public record. Spend some time finding previous reports related to your topic and as appropriate reference these in your work. This may assist in the acceptance of your work as you are building upon corporate history and subconscious memory.

Be aware of the lean Public Service

The Public Service is much leaner so in preparing to write and in the writing itself, be pragmatic, assume the reader does not have time to read all the details so write accordingly, for important matters spell the details out and don't rely on the reader having to reference external information to understand your document.

Dislikes to consider

During my interviews with the various executives in government I asked them what were the "pet hates" in relation to documents they received. The following is a summary list and provides you with an indication of things to avoid in your writing.

- ❖ Poor grammar and spelling and associated lack of editing and proofreading;
- ❖ Poor sentence structure, such as starting each sentence the same way, using the same words in sentences and/or having an "outpouring from the brain" without any structure of the thoughts and discussion which lead to boring reading;
- ❖ Paragraphs with "however", "but" and sentences with words like "got" and "she". These show a lack of consideration in the selection of words and structure;
- ❖ Long and over complicated writing;
- ❖ Use of jargon or TLA's (Three letter Acronyms!);
- ❖ Inadequate thinking, failure to build an argument and not providing the reader with a clear understanding of the important issues;
- ❖ Writing in either a patronising style or lack of appropriate formality;
- ❖ Overly technical when it does not need to be technical;
- ❖ If you are a private consultant writing a report to or for government don't give much space (if any) about yourself or firm. Assume that the selection process for your services has validated your expertise;
- ❖ Excessive (or any) weasel words or disclaimers;
- ❖ Passive rather than active language; and
- ❖ A report written by consensus rather than for the intended reader or champion of the recommended actions.

Specifically for the Minister

Whilst writing to or for a Minister will follow the general principles outlined in this paper, I believe it is worthwhile re-enforcing some specific points.

Given the amount of issues facing a Minister at any point of time, long dissertations will not be appreciated.

Ministers need to know the headline information (costs, revenue, key statistics (injuries per 1000 work hours etc) and the measurement of the recommendations (what are the key performance indicators associated with the recommendation).

The Minister will need to beware of the options that have been considered and the reasoning for the recommended course of action.

Graphics and other visual aids

Graphics (an image) can add significant power to a point being made in a report. You know the saying, "a picture paints a thousand words".

When you use a graphic (a photograph, map, graph etc) ensure that it is related to the text and provides a visual means for the reader to quickly understand a complex issue.

There has been an increase in the use of videos attached to reports or provided in a briefing presentation. Unfortunately, whilst these can be entertaining and informative, they can have the effect of distracting the audience from understanding the detailed and significant issues being considered. So as a word of warning - use them sparingly.

The PowerPoint (Keynote for Apple)

There are two main uses for Powerpoint: assist with the giving of a presentation, or a tool to document a major report.

If you are supporting your traditional written report with a presentation, remember some guiding principles:

- ❖ Keep it simple;
- ❖ The speaker is the main "act" not the PowerPoint, so forget the fancy transitions;
- ❖ Work on the principle of 10 slides for an hour presentation; and
- ❖ Don't use the presentation as the report but focus on key words or images to support the message you are providing.

If your report is being prepared in PowerPoint, these can be exceptionally effective if done well. As one senior executive interviewed mentioned to me he read a 170 page PowerPoint report and thought it was a fantastic and quick read!. The key is:

- ❖ Remember it still needs all the analysis, thought process, and quality as with a traditional report (ie this is not a lazy form or writing. Some firms engage specialist writer to prepare reports in this format).
- ❖ Use visual clues to assist the reader know where they are in the report;
- ❖ Use a mixture of words and visual means to express your message; and
- ❖ Use colour but be careful, not too much and beware of colour blind readers and what they will see.

Summary

Writing for government now means short and sharp documents.

To be successful in delivering your message and creating the desired action, your reasoning must be robust before the writing commences.

When writing focus on your audience, delivery with clarity and quality using these techniques.

Resources

Government Writing Guides/Information

Writing for Government Course Material - University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
<http://web.uvic.ca/~sdoyle/E302/Notes/index.html>

Guide Communications Guidelines for Writing Government Publications, State Government of Victoria, Australia
[http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/CommsWritingGuidelines/\\$file/gcg.pdf](http://www.dpc.vic.gov.au/CA256D800027B102/Lookup/CommsWritingGuidelines/$file/gcg.pdf)

Common pitfalls in local government writing
<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=8036055>

Study and Writing Guides (useful portal) University of Queensland
http://www.library.uq.edu.au/nott/subject_vr.php?id=SU

Specification Writing Best Practice Advice, Victorian Government Purchasing Board.
<http://www.vgpb.vic.gov.au/CA256C450016850B/0/75C6E5ADC457DB4CA256C7E00819769?OpenDocument>

Tips for writing policy, Queensland University of Technology
<https://wiki.qut.edu.au/download/attachments/5250980/Tips+for+writing+policy.pdf?version=1>

School of Public Health Writing Guide, University of Sydney
http://www.health.usyd.edu.au/current/coursework/writing_guide.pdf

Plain English

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=8021380>

<http://www.stylewriter.com.au/editorsoftware/plain-english/index.html>

Grammar

Active and Passive Voice (with examples), Purdue University
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_actpass.html/

Grammar and Mechanics
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

Citations and Quoting

Guide to writing reference and citations, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
https://www.batchelor.edu.au/library/guides/reference_guide.pdf

MLA Formatting and Style Guide, Purdue University
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/>

Correct use of Titles

Guide to Correctly Title Public Figure, Charles Darwin University
<http://www.cdu.edu.au/corporatecommunications/titles.html>

Editing and Proofreading

Proof reading your writing Purdue University
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/01/>

Editing and Proofreading, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts_pdf/Editing_and_Proofreading.pdf

Grammar: Proofreading and Editing, eMINTS, University of Missouri
<http://www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00001517.shtml>

Structuring Information for Reports and Presentations

Minto, Barbara *The Pyramid Principle*, 3rd Edition, Prentice Hall, UK, 2002

Zelazny, Gene *Say it with presentation*, McGraw-Hill eBook, 2006

Online Dictionary and Thesaurus

Online Dictionary from Ask.com
<http://dictionary.reference.com/>

Online Thesaurus from Ask.com
<http://thesaurus.reference.com/>

Specialist Areas

Statistics Every Writer Should Know:
<http://www.robertniles.com/stats/>

Note: Internet Resources were valid 15 February 2009

About the author



Jason Masters has over 25 years experience in governance in the public and private sector. His qualifications include a Bachelor of Economics, CGEIT, Fellow of the Institute of Internal Auditor in Australia, Certified Fraud Examiner, a Member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and a Member of the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply and Facilities Management Australia.

He has reviewed major programs and departmental activities for the appropriateness of their governance structures, risks and management controls at all levels of Government.

He has experience in major programs across multiple countries and cultures, such as China, Japan, Singapore, Philippines, India, USA and Canada, as well as Australia and New Zealand.

As one of Australia's leading experts in Governance tool kits he has worked with and mentored leaders in some of the largest government and commercial organisations.

He is also an author on Computer Security and an international speaker on Governance, Outsourcing and Internal Controls.

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- ³ Minto, B. (2002). *The Pyramid Principle 3rd Edition*, Financial Times Prentice Hall